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The Power of Prayer ... and Presence

by Rev. Kim Wood, Conference Minister

A colleague and I were recently discussing the power of prayer. It was a particularly poignant conversation in light of the way prayer seems to be used so flippantly these days, particularly in the wake of community tragedies. A mass shooting happens – someone is at a press conference giving an update and stating that “Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.” A person driving an SUV mows down 18 victims, 8 of whom died – and a



community figure speaking about it says, "We pray for the families whose loved ones have lost their lives." Another piece of legislation to harm people comes one step closer to being passed or signed into law, such as a bill to keep people who identify as transgender from competing in college or high school sports, or one that tightens bans on abortions, or one that reduces hospitals and treatment programs for mental health and drug treatment primarily in poverty-stricken areas, leaving residents without the means for care. "Our prayers are with the people whose lives are impacted by these injustices.

There is no denying that the power of prayer is strong, even palpable. But once it becomes rote words that are so adeptly thrown around as a pat response or a way to get off the hook for taking responsibility to affect change, it is just that ... empty words. Like anything else that truly matters, prayer requires attention and commitment. I'm not talking about a required daily time block or ritual devoted solely to prayer, although that is certainly one way of doing it. I'm talking about actually taking the next step from uttering words of promise to seeking connection with God. That will look different for each of us and may be an intentional moment when something happens to lift a prayer to God, or it may be a part of your morning routine, taking time with a prayer circle or in worship to turn to God with a concern, or having a conversation with God as you drive in to work or take your daily walk. Prayer requires engaging with God.

Did I say "engaging?" Yes, that's right. Prayer requires engaging with God, which means not just tossing the concern or incident God's way and moving on with life, but also keeping space for God to be in the conversation, too. When we pray, we make a conscious decision to engage with the Holy and accept that the Holy will also engage with us. We make a commitment to be present in and for the prayer that we are bringing to God.

Prayer has been on my mind a lot lately. It is too easy to tell someone they're in our prayers and then move on with our day. But the power of prayer comes not in the statement, "I will pray for you," but in the commitment to be present. What that looks like is between each of us and the One who has created us in the holiest of images. It may be a moment of comprehension that God has got this or a clear understanding that you are called to be present in other ways, such as activism or outreach. It may mean being physically present with a person or people, comforting them, holding them, praying with them. Whatever it is, it is not a lonely encounter of self but a collaborative encounter with God and humanity.

I hope you are taking time these days to pray. There are a lot of life-breaking and harm-doing things for us to be praying about: there are many

who need our prayers and with whom we might be praying. It is my prayer that, together as the Southeast Conference and individually, we will not only provide the words of prayerfulness but that we will accept the commitment to engage in prayer with God; that we find the pathways of presence, whatever they look like from God's wisdom and mercy to our ears and hearts, to not just acknowledge the tragedy, destructiveness, pain, and suffering of others, but to bring about real and just change. I hope you'll join me as we near the end of this Easter Season and prepare for Pentecost and the acknowledgment that, as Jesus promised, God has provided the Holy Spirit as our guide and strength. There is power in prayer ... and in presence.

News from the Conference Office



*Photos: Top - Installation of Joylynn Graham at Pleasant Hill Community Church, TN;
Bottom - Worship at Fairfield Glade Community Church, TN*

Where's the Conference Staff?

You've heard of "Where's Waldo?" We thought it would be fun for you hear more about our Southeast Conference staff's previous and upcoming visits and adventures. Maybe you'll find yourself in the area and will take some time to "find" us.

Recently

- May 4-8 – Rev. Kim Wood was at **Back Bay Mission** in Biloxi, MS , where she led a workshop on Open and Affirming and helped lead worship for the *Making Good Trouble Conference* and 100th Anniversary Celebration. She also spent time meeting with Back Bay Executive Director Rev. James Pennington and South Central Conference Minister Rev. Phil Hodson about growing the Southeast Conference's relationship Back Bay and the potential of a new church start in the Mississippi Gulf Region.
- May 7 – Rev. Fosburgh worshiped with **Fairfield Glade Community Church** in Fairfield Glade, TN at their Sunday Morning worship. Then Rev. Fosburgh celebrated the Installation of Rev. Joylynn Graham as pastor of **Pleasant Hill Community Church** in Pleasant Hill, TN.
- May 9 – Rev. Wood visited the former **Sandy Creek United Church of Christ** in La Fayette, AL, where she met with Ms. Louise Cox, the sole remaining active member of the congregation. The Sandy Creek congregation, located on property gifted to the Conference by Ms. Lala Allen for use by the church and as a potential retreat center site, received standing as an ONA church in 2006 in partnership with the SECUCC. They have now closed their doors, but their legacy remains ever a part of the community and the Southeast Conference. A prayer to decommission the building space and celebrate Sandy Creek UCC's ministry was offered that day.
- May 14 – Revs. Wood and Fosburgh were at their respective home churches, with Rev. Wood attending service at **Spirit of the Cross** in Huntsville, AL, and Rev. Fosburgh leading service at **Kirkwood United Church of Christ** in Atlanta, GA.

Looking Ahead

- May 21-23 – Rev. Wood will be at the **South Central Conference's Annual Meeting** at the Cathedral of Hope UCC in Dallas, TX.
- June 1-2 – **Southeast Conference Annual Meeting** at **Kirkwood UCC** in Atlanta, GA. We'll ALL be there and hope to see you, too!
- June 30-July 4 – Revs. Wood and Fosburgh will be with the Southeast Conference Delegation at the **34th UCC General Synod** in Indianapolis, IN.
- July 23 –The Conference Staff will join **Virginia Highland Church UCC in Atlanta, GA**, for their 100th Anniversary Celebration.
- July 30 – The Conference Staff will join **Methodist-Congregational Federated Church in Demorest, GA**, as they celebrate the

- retirement of their pastor, Rev. Joyce Acree
- August 6 – Rev. Wood will worship with **Pilgrim Church UCC in Birmingham, AL**, as they celebrate their 120th Anniversary.
 - August 13 – Rev. Wood will worship with **First United Church, UCC in Belvidere, TN**, on the occasion of their 150th Anniversary celebration.



Heart of Texas Assn Min Rev. Nikki Stahl, SCC Conf. Minister Rev. Phil Hodson, UCC General Minister and President Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, SEC Conf. Minister Rev. Kim Wood, and CHHSM President and CEO Jamar Doyle

Back Bay Mission STILL Making Good Trouble after 100 Years

Back Bay Mission began in 1922 as an outreach of the First Evangelical Church of Biloxi, MS to the “fisher folk” of the area. Today, 100(+) years later, Back Bay continues to offer a variety of ministries serving the poor and marginalized of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the people of the United Church of Christ. From providing emergency assistance to addressing houselessness at many levels, from offering education and empowerment programs to being a destination for mission trip groups and social justice interns, the staff and volunteers at Back Bay Mission embody the extravagant welcome of the United Church of Christ in relationships with clients, supporters, and other members and partners of the community.

On May 4-7, 2023, Back Bay Mission gathered folks locally and from across

the country to celebrate its 100 years of ministry and to look ahead to the next century of serving the community and tackling poverty head-on. Highlights of the event were the *Making Good Trouble* Conference on Friday, with UCC General Minister and President Rev. John Dorhauer and EEECHO (Education, Economics, Environmental, Climate and Health Organization) co-founder Ms. Katherine Egland, and the first United Church of Christ worship service on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in several decades. Southeast Conference Minister Rev. Kim Wood presented the workshop “Why ONA?: What is Open and Affirming and Why does it Matter?” South Central Conference Minister Rev. Phil Hodson, Back Bay Mission’s Executive Director Rev. James Pennington, Gulf Center for Equitable Climate Resilience’s Director Renee Collini, and Rev. Dorhauer also provided workshops for the conference. Other activities included the “In Their Shoes” presentation about Back Bay’s work; a social to celebrate the *Making Good Trouble* Capital Campaign, which has raised over \$1 million; a shrimp boil to learn about this gulf culinary treasure that has served as fundraisers for Back Bay all over the country, and a breakfast fellowship with Clemon P. Jimerson, Sr., who was part of the Biloxi Wade In to stand up for desegregation of the beaches in the area.

For more information about Back Bay Mission, go to <https://thebackbaymision.org>, or join us at the Southeast Conference Annual Meeting in Atlanta on June 2 and 3 to meet Rev. Pennington. The SECUCC looks forward to building and strengthening our relationship with Back Bay Mission and working in partnership with the South Central Conference UCC to broaden the voice of the United Church of Christ on the Gulf Coast!



Photo 1: Worship; Photo 2: BBM Director Rev. James Pennington and Guest Clemon P. Jimerson.Sr



Prayer List

We are continuing the process of praying for authorized ministers, congregations, and ministry groups throughout 2023. We encourage you to include these prayer requests in your local church newsletter, share them with your prayer circle, and include them in your own prayers.

Week of May 21

- First Congregational Christian UCC; Montgomery Alabama
- Clara Benson
- Diane Tugel
- Stephanie Crumpton
- Nancy E. Dietsch

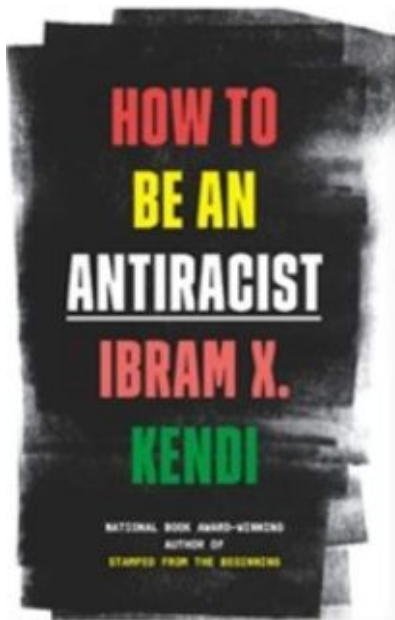
Week of May 28

- Real Inspiration Ministries; Decatur, Georgia
- Christy Bonner
- Andrew Frierson Jr
- Dorothy Gager

Churches in Transition

First Congregational, Savannah GA; Trinity Congregational, Athens AL; Holy Trinity Community Church, Nashville TN; Deer Lodge Congregational Church, Deer Lodge TN; Brookemeade Congregational, Nashville TN; Rush Memorial, Atlanta GA; Sandy Creek, Lafayette AL; First Congregational Christian, Montgomery AL; Open Table UCC, Mobile AL; Safe Harbor Family Church, Clinton MS; Howard Congregational, Nashville TN

News from the Wider Church

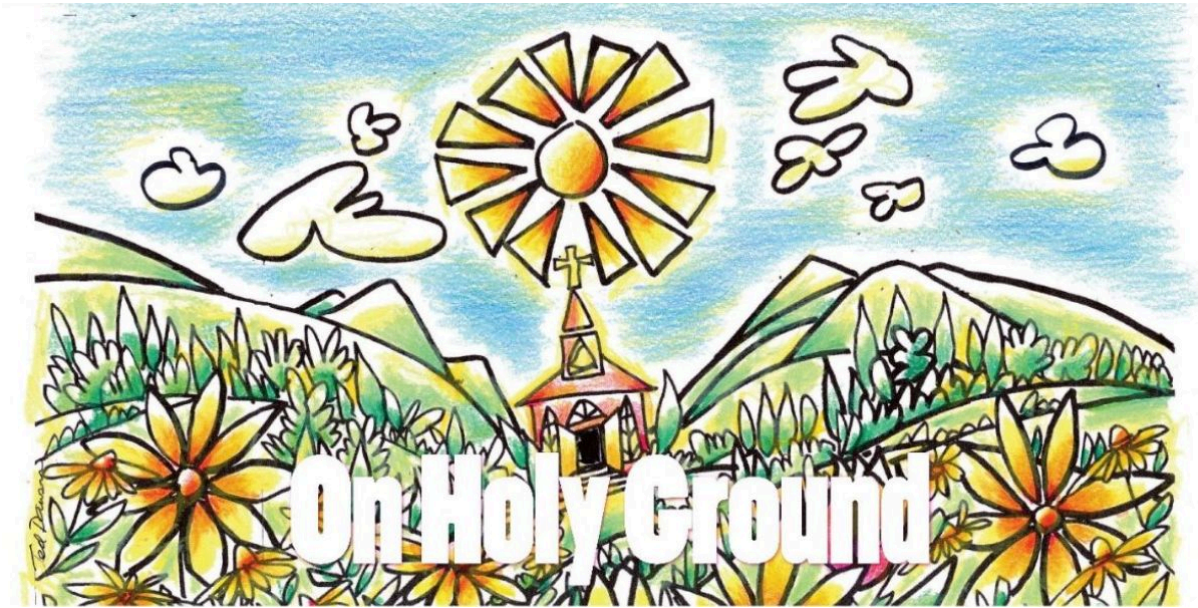


Join the All Church Read, Join the Antiracism Journey, Join the Movement!

20 years ago, at General Synod 24, the UCC adopted a resolution calling for the UCC to be an antiracist church and we have been working toward that end ever since. Recent events too numerous to name show us that racialized violence, harm, and inequities persist and continue to grow, making God's dream of a just and loving world seem far from our lived realities. We have work to do if we are to become an antiracist church and build an antiracist world. To equip us on this journey toward racial justice, we at [Join the Movement](#) are calling on the whole church to engage in an all-church read of Ibram X. Kendi's book, [How to Be an Antiracist](#). Check out the [resources available on Frontline Faith](#) to assist you, including a Facilitator's Guide, Discussion Guides, historical and cultural context videos from [Dr. Renee K. Harrison](#), prayers, scripture readings, discussion forums, and more!

Form a book group at your church or partner with another church to host discussions. Have your church council read the book together. Host an after-church adult formation class. Have a conference-wide zoom discussion group. Engage your youth in intergenerational conversations. Read the book with a friend and conversation partner. Process the ideas individually by reading and journaling. There are so many ways to participate. We hope you'll find one that works for you.

As Kendi says in his introduction, “This book is ultimately about the basic struggle we’re all in, the struggle to be fully human and to see that others are fully human.” As people of faith, we know that this kind of loving regard is an essential part of our discipleship. We hope you’ll join together with so many others in exploring how this book and these antiracist practices can move us toward racial justice!



Strengthen the Church Offering 2023

The Strengthen the Church offering supports the expansion of ministry and growth of UCC local congregations. Your support of this offering will help the UCC fulfill on its commitment to creating a just world for all by investing in new ministries and practices that meet the emerging needs of local communities.

As God calls our congregations to be the church in new ways, your generosity will plant new churches, awaken new ideas in existing churches and develop the spiritual life in our youth and young adults. Most congregations will receive the STC offering on Pentecost Sunday, May 28, 2023.

Resources for this year's Strengthen the Church offering are available at United Church the United Church Resources website, <https://uccresources.com>. You can also contact Southeast Conference staff for more information.

Trainings, Conferences & Events



Retired Ministers Healthy Boundary Training June 2, 2023, 9:15 am-12:30 pm ET Kirkwood United Church of Christ

This training, taught by Rev. Char Burch, is for retired ministers only. This course fulfills the Boundary Training Requirements to maintain standing. This particular training will be offered onsite in conjunction with Annual Meeting. A sandwich lunch will be provided at the end of the class, and it will finish in time for the start of the Annual Meeting. [Register here.](#)
(We will be offering another training online later in the year.)

Conference Calendar

May 16 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm EDT

[Clergy Conversations via Zoom](#)

May 18 @ 1:00 pm - 1:30 pm EDT

[Live Harp Meditations for Ministers](#)

May 18 @ 6:00 pm - 7:00 pm EDT

[Commission on Ministry Meeting](#)

May 23 @ 9:30 am - 11:00 am EDT

[Zoom Conversation for Specialized Ministers](#)

May 23 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm EDT

[Clergy Conversations via Zoom](#)

May 23 @ 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm EDT

[Budget Hearing in Preparation for Annual Meeting](#)

May 25 @ 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm EDT

[Budget Hearing in Preparation for Annual Meeting](#)

May 30 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm EDT

[Clergy Conversations via Zoom](#)

June 2 - June 3

[SEC UCC Annual Meeting](#)

View the full calendar of events online: <https://www.secucc.org/events/>

Contact Us

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